

Buddhism As A Religion – Part 1

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An Introduction – by Ven Dr M. Punnaji Maha Thera

TOPICS

1. **Introduction:** The difference between magic and religion, religion as an evolutionary process
2. **Evolution:** Biological and Psychological process
3. **Theology:** Comparative Theology – Theistic and Humanistic definition of God
4. **Cosmology:** Comparative Buddhist and Astronomical Thinking
5. **Eschatology:** Kamma, Rebirth, Samsara, and the Realms of Existence
6. **Soteriology:** Salvation of man in Nibanna
7. **Conclusion:** Buddhism is a religion advanced to its culmination or ultimate climax which is becoming a Buddha

WHAT IS RELIGION

- Two types of religion: **Theistic & Humanistic**
- Theistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, & Hinduism
- Buddhism is a Humanistic religion
- English dictionaries define religion theistically
- Buddhism defines religion humanistically

DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS

“RELIGION”

- *“the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods”* (Oxford Dictionary)
- *“the service and worship of God or the supernatural”* (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary)

“THEISM”

- *“belief in the existence of a god or gods, specifically of a creator who intervenes in the universe”* (Oxford Dictionary)
- *“belief in the existence of a god or gods; specifically: belief in the existence of one God viewed as the creative source of the human race and the world who transcends yet is immanent in the world”* (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary)

“HUMANISM”

- *“a rationalist outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters”* (Oxford Dictionary)
- *“a doctrine, attitude, or way of life centered on human interests or values; especially: a philosophy that usually rejects supernaturalism and stresses an individual's dignity and worth and capacity for self-realization through reason”* (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary)

THEISTIC DEFINITION OF RELIGION

Two types of Theistic religions:

- Polytheistic: the belief in and prayer to many gods
- Monotheistic: the belief in, prayer to, and obedience to one supreme Creator of the world

Most Western and middle Eastern religions are Theistic

HUMANISTIC DEFINITION OF RELIGION

- Religion is the human effort to solve the human problem of existence, through the conscious evolution of the human consciousness;
- The human consciousness evolves to the point when the human being transcends all human weaknesses and earthly limitations, and enters a superhuman state (***uttari-manussa***) and even going beyond this to the ultimate level called Sublime level (***ariya bhumi***), when the process of evolution reaches its final climax.

DISADVANTAGE OF THE THEISTIC DEFINITION

- The definition given in English dictionaries appears blasphemous, seen from a modern perspective.
- This is because blind belief in religious dogmas, rites, and rituals have been discarded by the intellectuals since the age of enlightenment in the West.
- This means that even the respectable moral spiritual values associated with religion would be discarded by the modern generation like throwing the baby with the bath water.
- Responsible citizens are greatly concerned about this fact.

ADVANTAGE OF THE HUMANISTIC DEFINITION

Therefore the humanistic definition that saves the moral and spiritual values of religion is acceptable to the modern world that has already turned humanistic in recognizing and respecting the value of human intelligence and scientific progress.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

- Religion has not come down from heaven to fulfill the need of a “Creator”;
- It had arisen on earth to satisfy a human need;
- Since the dawn of humanity, Man has faced the dilemma of the insecurities of life which is a “problem” – birth, aging, sickness, death;
- Primitive man when faced with this insecurity, in addition to his ignorance about natural phenomena, fuelled by his primitive instinctive superstitions and fear of the unknown, had no refuge to turn to, other than imaginary gods, spirits, or demons that they guessed may be governing the world;

ORIGIN OF THEISTIC RELIGION

- Religion becomes the solution to the problem of insecurities of life;
- Seeking help from gods or spirits became the earliest form of religion that appeared on earth;
- Primitive man's primal fear of the unknown, together with feeling of insecurity, fuelled the primitive man's need for salvation in gods and spirits – giving rise to theistic religion as a convenient escape from the real problem of insecurities;
- Therefore, theistic religion is an escape from reality into fantasy;
- Hence, the origin and nature of theistic religion has been revealed;

MAN'S UNION WITH GOD

The reality for theistic religion is that Man is the imperfect creation of the perfect God, and therefore the purpose of religion is to unite Man with God by Man imitating God;



The reality for humanistic religion is that the perfect "god" is the conception of the imperfect Man, as an ideal to be realized through the practice of religion;

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL CHALLENGE

- Even in today's world, in spite of all the greatest scientific discoveries and modern technologies, the "problem" of insecurities of life could not be resolved;
- Advancement in modern technologies has brought about an explosion of countless forms of sensual gratification methods and life extension medication, which has made the "problem" even worse;
- Modern man experiences the cognitive dissonance of recognizing the inevitability and unpredictability of death while at the same time desiring to live forever;
- Modern man turns to religion as the solution to the problem of insecurities of life, culminating in the aspiration for eternal life;

THE CASE FOR HUMANISTIC RELIGION

- With expansion in modern man's cognitive capacities and intellect, the modern man begins to seek a more rational and humanistic form of religion to address challenges in the modern world;
- Man's search for meaning in this modern world has led the more educated and rational-minded to turn to contemplative practices rather than to theistic religions;
- This explains the growth in popularity of **Buddhism** as a religion among more educated and rational-minded men and women of today;
- This also explains the reason for the publication of this book on Buddhism as a religion;
- This comes out as a modern perspective on an ancient religion – the ever modern and ever relevant Buddhism.

IS BUDDHISM ATHEISTIC?

Buddhism is neither theistic nor atheistic, but humanistic;

It reveals a humanistic concept of god;

Therefore it can be called **Anthropotheism**;

God is seen as a human concept – the ultimate in human evolution;

It is the concept of perfection; *[This is quite in agreement with theistic thinking that considers God to be Omniscient, Omnipotent, and Omnibenevolent]*

Religion is seen as the human effort to realize this ideal of perfection, to solve the problem of existence; *[This is in agreement with theistic thinking that speaks of union with God]*

Buddhists believe that the human being can reach that ultimate state of perfection; *[Theistic thinking accepts that it is possible to unite with God]*

When a person realizes this ideal of perfection, he is called God-become ("Brahma bhuto"). *[In Western theistic thinking the union with God is only being in the presence of God in heaven. In Eastern theistic thinking man is already God but union is only to realize, "I am God"]*

THE ANTHROPOMORPHIC GOD

This "God-become" is the **Anthropomorphic God** of the Buddhists.

This **Anthropomorphic God** of the Buddhists is the **BUDDHA**.

The Buddha is "**Loka nata**" (saviour of the world)

The Buddha is "**Loka vidu**" (world knower)

The Buddha is "**Maha karuniko**"
(the great compassionate one)

